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Merry Pranksters leader Ken Babbs, Ken Kesey's best friend, is 'hooked' on spotlight, adds to psychedelic 1960s myth



The Merry Pranksters' bus, shown here in Portland years after its famous cross-country trip, never failed to draw a crowd. *Oregonian*

Ken Babbs is miffed that the big publishers back east don't seem very interested in his memoir.

"It doesn't fit into their idea of anything," he says, on the phone from his 6-acre farm in Lane County. "None of them realize the size of the audience I'm dealing with."

He might be right about the publishing world's cluelessness. Sure, Babbs' 2011 novel "Who Shot the Water Buffalo?" didn't break any sales records, but that was about the Vietnam War. The unpublished memoir is about the Merry Pranksters.

You know the Pranksters: Ken Kesey, the "magic bus," the Acid Tests. Whole different readership for that subject. Maybe, at this point, a much bigger one.

Babbs, now 85, was there for all of it. You could even call him the original Prankster.

"He's very funny," points out Zane Kesey, the late Ken Kesey's son. "He doesn't have the best jokes, but his sense of humor is contagious."

The Merry Pranksters, for anyone who doesn't know, were a small group of seekers who in the mid-1960s decided to drop out of the "straight life." They drove across the country in a brightly painted bus, in search of "nothing and everything."

Along the way they shocked small-town residents with their LSD-fueled shenanigans: blasting music and nonsense talk from speakers mounted on top of the bus, running around Main Street USA giggling in oddball garb (or no garb), having sex in the woods. They documented all of it on 16-mm film. When you think of 1960s pop-culture psychedelia, you're thinking of the Pranksters.

The press tended to focus on Kesey, author of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and thus the most famous member of the group. But it was Babbs who came up with the name Merry Pranksters. And with his booming laugh and up-for-anything attitude, he set the tone.

"A big part of the Prankster ethos is to live in the now," Babbs says. "That's what we were doing."
1986 Press Photo Oregon County Fair

Living life in the "now" is the Prankster ethos.

Everyone in the group got a nickname -- Babbs' was The Intrepid Traveler. There was Swashbuckler (Kesey), Mountain Girl (Carolyn Adams), Stark Naked (Cathy Casamo), Mal Function (Mike Hagen), Speed Limit (Neal Cassady).

Paula Sundsten became Gretchen Fetchin -- and she also became Babbs' girlfriend. Never mind that Babbs had a wife and kids at home.

"Gretchen and I fell in love on the bus trip," Babbs says. "I had two women for a while. But that didn't work out."

Babbs' booming laugh made the phone buzz.

Such transgressions are understandable when you're living in the now -- and spurred on by the use of acid.

LSD "helped me understand myself," says George Walker, one of the Pranksters (his nickname was Hardly Visible). "It changed my life, much for the better."

Kesey had discovered lysergic acid diethylamide half a dozen years earlier through his participation in CIA-funded, hospital-supervised drug experiments during his college days. This opened up for him a "great secret life," as Tom Wolfe put it in "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test," the classic 1968 book about the Pranksters' bus tour. Kesey wanted to share the mind-expanding experience, and so LSD, legal at the time, became the Pranksters' guiding light, usually slugged down with orange juice.

It couldn't last, of course. Real life has a way of intruding even on hallucinogenic secrets. Eventually, the "Non-people" -- a Wolfeian term for what a younger generation would probably call Muggles -- won out. Or thought they did.

When the first edit of the Pranksters movie debuted at the Whitney Museum in 1975, New York Times critic Vincent Canby called it boring and insisted the counterculture's chemical experiment had failed, that "the big drop-out never came, and reporters who are paid to spot trends in several

thousand words or less are now writing pieces about the renewed popularity of booze among the young.”

Everyone knows booze isn’t going to expand your consciousness.

“One of the things psychedelics do for you,” says Zane Kesey, “it makes you look at yourself like never before.” You can’t hide from your character failings, he adds, “it’ll push your face down into that turd. You either have to change that about yourself, or you don’t do psychedelics again.”

The Merry Pranksters wanted to smell that turd -- they wanted to understand every nook and cranny of human existence and to better themselves.

“What people need to remember about the Pranksters,” Zane points out, “is they were achievers.” (Ken Kesey published “Cuckoo’s Nest” at 26, and Walker attended Stanford Law School. Babbs completed his Vietnam novel while serving in the Marines in the early 1960s -- before misplacing the manuscript.)

“But they also had big ideals,” Zane continues. “They weren’t going to settle for working in some [corporate] coal mine.”



Ken Kesey poses with his bus "Further" in Springfield, Ore., in 1997. (AP Photo/Jeff Barnard, File)AP

Like the Springfield-raised, wrestling-champion Kesey, Ken Babbs had lived the expected life once, the one where the corporate coal mine beckoned.

He grew up in Mentor, Ohio, played on the 1958 Miami University basketball team that reached the NCAA Tournament’s Sweet 16, studied engineering. But then he met Kesey in graduate school,

and, thanks to the Naval ROTC program that put him through college, he ended up in the Marine Corp, flying helicopters in Vietnam for a year shortly before the big U.S. troop buildup.

Safely back in the States, and part of the generation that came of age between the Beats and the Hippies, he knew only that he wanted to live life. He was ready to get on the bus.

In 1964, Kesey's second novel, "Sometimes a Great Notion," was about to be published, and Babbs was carrying around the manuscript of "Water Buffalo," marked up by his agent. Babbs and Kesey were beginning to wonder if writing was the best way to make an impact on the world.

"We were tired of writing because of all the typing," Babbs jokes.

Neal Cassady, the model for the iconic character of Dean Moriarty in Jack Kerouac's influential 1957 Beat novel "On the Road," started hanging around with them. He ended up as the Pranksters' bus driver -- hence the nickname Speed Limit.

Merry Pranksters

Beat icon Neal Cassady, seen here in the documentary "Magic Trip," drives the Pranksters bus. (Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures)

Babbs remembers Cassady's reaction when he realized the Pranksters would be filming the entire cross-country trip.

"You mean I'm going to be a movie star in my declining years?" Cassady said.

Kesey responded: "There's nothing I'd like more to do for you."

It didn't turn out that way. A couple of years later, with the 40 hours of film sitting in storage, Kesey found himself doing time for a marijuana bust -- after faking suicide and fleeing the country. Not long after that, Cassady died from exposure after passing out while walking along a railroad track in Mexico. He was just 41.

Despite such traumas, Babbs marinated in the counterculture for a while longer, bounding onstage to offer "spontaneous eruptions" at the beginning of Grateful Dead concerts, getting muddy at Woodstock, swatting away Hunter S. Thompson's paranoia. He loved being the center of attention, joining in with wild endeavors.

"I got bit by the spotlight in high school, playing football under the lights," he says. "I've been hooked ever since."

Ken Kesey

In time he settled down, buying a small chunk of land near Dexter, not far from Kesey's larger property. He built a house, with the help of some of his kids (he has nine children with three women). He used wood from warehouse pallets and from an old barn nearby that the owner was tearing down.

Babbs picked up seasonal work to survive -- one job involved monitoring a conveyor belt that shuttled along freshly picked carrots. He had to remove the rotten ones.

"Food stamps saved our ass," he admits.

This is a desultory existence for a talented, college-educated man, one might think. Babbs insists he wouldn't have it any other way.

"You learn how to live like that," he says. "It's a really valuable thing to learn how to do. You can do it. You just have to have optimism."

Besides, it wasn't just about survival. He kept up his creative pursuits.

Ken Babbs has published a chapter of his memoir as a chapbook called "We Were Arrested," available at his website skypilotclub.com. This is the chapbook's back cover.

He and Kesey, having put their acid experimentation behind them, worked together on various projects over the years -- including the alternative literary magazine *Spit in the Ocean*, the 1994 novel "The Last Round-Up" and the musical play "Twister," with Babbs in the cast during impromptu tours up and down the West Coast.

The two friends perfectly complemented each other as collaborators. "Kesey was more disciplined, and Babbs was more freewheeling," Walker says.

In the early 1960s, Kesey wanted to be more like Babbs, Walker adds. "When Babbs was in the Marines, Kesey talked about him all the time," he says.

Babbs and Kesey both ended up being indisputably themselves, of course -- and that was the point.

"The real thing about America is freedom," Babbs says. "How to be free in a country trying to grab you and get you on its wavelength. One of the greatest evils is advertising. Free will we're talking about."

The Prankster message is still important, he adds, "that sense of joy in life, that you have to make the most of it."

Kesey, he says, made the most of his time. Babbs says he still misses his longtime best friend, who died in 2001 at 66.

"That guy was special," Babbs says. "Big-time special. Powerful and funny and gracious. He was gracious with everyone."

Babbs has carried on without Kesey for 20 years now. He thought he had lost forever "Who Shot the Water Buffalo?" during his acid-dropping days, but it turned out he'd sent a carbon copy to a Marine pal. Early in the 2000s that old friend stumbled upon it.



Zane Kesey, George Walker, Ken Babbs and others pose with the neglected Pranksters bus in 2005. (The Oregonian)LC- The Oregonian

Babbs was delighted to discover that the manuscript held up. He gave it an edit and sold the novel to The Overlook Press. Publishers Weekly heralded “Water Buffalo” as “an impeccable, humorous heirloom, a shock of napalm that smells like ... victory.”

Then Babbs moved on to the next project, his Merry Pranksters-centric memoir, which he’s titled “Cronies.” It won’t bother him if all the big New York publishers do pass on it, he says. There are a couple of independent publishers that are interested, and he always likes helping the little guy.

He’s convinced the memoir will sell briskly not because of aging 1960s nostalgists but because today’s young people understand and embrace the Prankster ethos.
Ken Babbs

Ken Babbs' book, "Who Shot the Water Buffalo?" photographed at the writer's home.LC-

For Babbs, the bus trip and the Pranksters’ other activities -- the open-to-all Acid Test parties meant to expand Americans’ minds and the disparate guerilla-theater-like events -- remain central to his identity, more than 50 years later.

The same goes for Walker, who says “it means more to me now than it did then.”

Zane Kesey says that's the way it is for all of the surviving Pranksters.

"The best reason I can give," he says, "is a quote from my Dad: 'You can't quit the Mob.' It was such a fork in the road for all of them. How could it not stay with them?"

Babbs undertook "Cronies" in part as an attempt to set the record straight, admitting he wasn't happy with Alex Gibney's 2011 documentary "Magic Trip," which utilized the hours of film the Pranksters shot. ("I won't watch it," Babbs says of the movie. "It's offensive to me. We made it, and it was an honest thing. He wasn't there.")

But Babbs also recognizes there is no getting at the true story, not really. He calls his memoir a "burlesque," because it's both true and full of "exaggerations and inventions."

"It's reality-plus," he says.

He sees no problem with such an approach to memoir, especially one about the psychedelic '60s.

"It's all myth now," he says. "Everything is right, everything adds to the myth. Over time all the worthless stuff will slough off, and [someone] will put what remains together, and that will be 'The Iliad' or 'The Odyssey' of the '60s."

-- Douglas Perry